

ARKANSAS IMAGINATION LIBRARY
Building the Reading Brain
Birth–5 Teacher Guide & Family Literacy Activities



Every Arkansas Imagination Library book is an opportunity to build the reading brain. This guide provides developmentally appropriate, play-based learning experiences aligned with the Arkansas Early Learning Standards to strengthen language, literacy, and school readiness through meaningful interactions with books.

Forts by Katie Venit
Delivery Month: August
Group 4 • Three-Year-Olds

Learning Goals/Objectives

Language & Literacy

- Discriminate and recognize the vowel-r sound in spoken words.
- Build vocabulary through meaningful conversations and read-alouds.
- Develop oral language by retelling stories and sharing ideas.

Cognitive & Mathematics

- Measure, describe, compare, and classify objects and shapes.
- Use a variety of tools to explore, identify, and compare the attributes of objects.
- Develop problem-solving and observation skills through hands-on exploration.

Social-Emotional Development

- Engage in cooperative play, teamwork, and negotiation with peers.
- Develop a positive sense of self through self-expression and self-awareness.
- Demonstrate respect for others while working collaboratively in group activities.

Physical Development

- Demonstrate control, coordination, and strength through gross motor activities.
- Strengthen fine motor skills while constructing, manipulating, and creating

with a variety of materials.

Arkansas Early Learning Standards

- Social Emotional
 - SE1 - Develops a positive sense of self and self-awareness.
 - SE3 - Builds and maintains positive relationships with adults and peers.
- Cognitive Development Domain
 - CD 1.1 – Demonstrates curiosity, initiative, and engagement in learning.
 - CD 2.1 – Uses reasoning, problem-solving, and critical-thinking skills.
- Physical Development Domain
 - PH1.3 – Demonstrates increasing control, coordination, and strength in gross motor movements.
 - PH2.1 – Uses fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination to manipulate objects and materials.
- Language Development Domain
 - LD4 Develops receptive and expressive language skills to communicate effectively.
- Emergent Literacy Domain
 - EL1.2 – Demonstrates interest in and engagement with books, stories, and other print materials.
 - EL3.2 – Demonstrates phonological awareness by noticing and playing with sounds in spoken language (r-controlled vowel).
- Mathematics Domain
 - MT3.1 Explores, identifies, and compares attributes of objects such as size, shape, color, and quantity.
 - MT4.1 – Uses measurement concepts and tools to compare and describe objects and events.

SCIENCE OF READING CONNECTIONS

Oral Language Development, Vocabulary Development, Phonological Awareness, Comprehension, and Print Concepts through interactive read-alouds and content-rich discussions.

MATERIALS

- Fort: Building Materials, Sheets or blankets, Clothespins, Pillows, Cardboard boxes, Chairs/tables, Pool noodles, Painter's tape, Large blocks

- Literacy Materials: Chart paper, Markers, Vocabulary cards, Picture sequencing cards, Clipboards and crayons
- Art Supplies: Brown paper bags, Craft sticks, Glue, Stickers, Tempera paint
- STEM Materials: Measuring tapes, Small flashlights, Toy animals/people, Plastic cups and connectors

ENGAGE (BEFORE READING)

Ask:

- “Have you ever built a fort?”
- “What makes a good hiding place?”
- “What materials could we use to build one?”

Introduce vocabulary using pictures and real objects. Have vocabulary words written on cards to match objects with pictures (Fort, Build, Shelter Strong, Balance, Cozy, Design, Teamwork)

EXPLORE (DURING READING)

Read the book *Fort*. Pause to ask:

- “What do you think will happen next? What makes you say that?”
- “How are the characters solving problems?”
- “What would YOU add to your fort? Why?”

Encourage prediction and discussion during the read aloud. Emphasize how the R-controlled vowel (bossy R) changes a vowel sound /o/ to /or/. Brainstorm other words that might have this /r/ sound with a vowel. Practice saying the /or/ sound showing how the R bosses the sound so you hear the /r/. Bossy R song.

EXTEND (AFTER READING)

Discuss: Why do people build forts? How did the characters work together? What made the fort special?

Literacy: Create a class chart: “**What Makes a Great Fort?**” Use the language experience approach to add student suggestions to the great fort chart. Change marker color for each child’s response.

Fort Story Retelling in Literacy Center : Children use puppets or props to retell the story. To extend, children can draw a picture of their fort with a dictated sentence to the teacher.

ART: Children create a “Design your Dream Fort” plan, complete with blueprint drawings, mini forts from craft materials, and painted fort pictures. Add vocabulary labels such as door, window, blanket and pillow. Dictate a sentence that describes your dream fort.

Dramatic Play: Build a fort in one of your centers. Challenge is “Can you build a fort strong enough to stay standing all day?” Children experiment with: Balance, Weight, Height, Stability. Teacher prompts could be “What could make it stronger?” “Why did it fall?” “What should we try next? What do you need to build a fort?”

Math/STEM: Measuring Our Fort - Children measure: How tall, How wide, How many pillows or blocks. Use: Nonstandard units (blocks, footsteps), Simple counting, Shape identification

Questions: “Which fort is taller?” “How many blocks long is your fort?” “Can you build a fort strong enough to stay standing?” “What could make it stronger?” “Why did it fall?” “What should we try next?”

ASSESSMENT

Collect evidence through: Anecdotal notes, Photos of construction, Vocabulary and phonemic awareness checklists, Child drawing and dictation samples, and Observation during cooperative play

DIFFERENTIATION

Simplify Tasks by Using smaller fort-building materials, Focusing on simple stacking and covering, or building a table top fort. Support Language by using picture vocabulary cards, modeling short phrases (big fort, soft blanket, my house), Engage with the story by focusing on identifying pictures and repeating key words, asking simple questions such as “What is this?” and “Who is inside?”

Fine Motor Adaptations: Use larger crayons and chunky blocks, providing tape already torn into strips; Velcro instead of clips, larger connectors, Adaptive scissors or crayons

Sensory Sensitivities: Offer quieter fort spaces, Use softer lighting, Allow noise-reduction headphones if needed, Different textures for fleece blankets, cardboard, and pillows; Allow children to observe before participating

Gross Motor Challenges: Modify Building Tasks by using tabletop forts, Accessible Participation by assigning roles (designer, flashlight holder, storyteller, material organizer)

Learning Styles: Visual Learners (Blueprint examples, Picture schedules, Diagrams of forts); Auditory Learners (Story discussions, Songs about building, Read-aloud repetition); Kinesthetic Learners (Active fort construction, Crawling through tunnels, Movement games); Creative Learners (Open-ended art, Dramatic storytelling, Designing imaginative forts)

TEACHER RESOURCES & REFLECTION

What went well in this lesson?

What did students learn? How do I know?

What would I do differently if teaching this lesson again?

- Resources for teachers - Video example of teaching with this book for OR sound.
<https://www.facebook.com/discoverwildlearning/videos/868784912857872/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEeZQYkAXrQ>
- Alignment to Frog Street Curriculum: <https://www.frogstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Arkansas-Child-Development-and-Early-Learning-Standards-Correlation-to-Frog-Street-Pre-K.pdf>

FAMILY CONNECTION

“Build a Family Fort Night”

Include:

- Simple fort-building ideas
- Family reading suggestions such as reading together and child claps when they hear the /or/ sound in book
- Conversation starters

Example:

“What would your dream fort include?” How could we build a fort outside?
Compare an indoor and outdoor fort.

Family Literacy Night Activities



The Wonder Space & Sanctuary Lab

Inspired by *Forts* by Katie Venit

Literacy Focus: Lush & Descriptive Language • The /or/ Sound (*Fort, Door, Floor, Outdoor*) • Storytelling • Noticing Details

Science & STEM Focus: Architectural Stability • Nonstandard Measurement • Natural Spaces & Gratitude • Spatial Design

Big Idea: A fort isn't just blankets and sticks—it's a sacred, wonder-filled space where we slow down, notice the beauty around us, and feel safe to dream.

Learning Outcomes

Families will:

- **Practice intentional "noticing"** by observing small details, colors, textures, and peaceful elements in their environment.
- **Explore structural engineering concepts** (balance, support, height, and stability) by building mini desktop "dream fort" frameworks.
- **Engage in creative spatial customization** by crafting origami paper cranes and painting marker-rocks to define a peaceful, special sanctuary.
- **Strengthen phonological awareness** by listening for and identifying the bossy-R /or/ sound (*fort, door, floor, store, outdoor*).
- **Create a Family Sanctuary Kit** to take home so they can construct indoor or outdoor spaces for quiet reading and family connection.

Materials

Each Family Receives:

- **Family Sanctuary Kit Bag**
 - Paper lunch bag or tote
 - 1 Mini LED flashlight or tea light
 - 4–6 Large wooden craft sticks or pipe cleaners
 - 2 Smooth, flat river rocks
 - Square origami paper (bright colors)
 - 2 Wood clothespins
 - 1 Mini clipboard with "Fort Architect Blueprint" paper
 - Crayons or colored pencils

Station Materials (Shared Among Families)

- Paint pens or acrylic markers (for rock painting)
- Painter's tape (pre-cut strips on table edges)

- Non-standard measuring tools (linking cubes, yarn, footsteps card)
- Sample paper cranes (pre-folded for inspiration)

Agenda (25–30 Minutes)

1. Welcome & Interactive Read Aloud (7–8 Minutes)

Introduce the story by saying:

"Tonight we are exploring *Forts* by Katie Venit. This book uses quiet, beautiful words to remind us that a fort is more than just walls—it's a special spot to rest, notice the world, and let our imaginations fly. As we read, listen closely for the secret sound of the night: the **'or'** sound in **FORT!**"

Pause throughout the story to ask:

- *Look at this page—what tiny details do you notice that make this space feel cozy?*
- *Do you hear the /or/ sound? Let me say it: F-OR-T. Can you clap when you hear words like fort, door, or floor?*
- *The characters added paper cranes to their space. How does adding something special turn a plain corner into a sanctuary?*

Introduce key vocabulary:

- **Fort**
- **Sanctuary**
- **Notice**
- **Wonder**
- **Cozy**
- **Balance**
- **Boundary**

2. Family Activity: Sanctuary & Fort Design Studio (10–12 Minutes)

Invite families to work together at their stations to design their mini sanctuary items.

Explain:

"Great fort-builders are both **engineers** and **artists**! Tonight, you'll design the special treasures that mark your family's fort—whether it's built under a dining table, in a backyard garden, or under a cozy blanket."

Step A: Design Sanctuary Boundary Marker Rocks

- Select 1–2 smooth river rocks.
- Use paint pens to draw symbols of peace, nature, or wonder (stars, leaves, hearts, family initials, or secret fort logos).
- *Purpose:* In outdoor spaces, placing these painted stones marks the doorway or border of your secret fort!

Step B: Fold a "Wish & Wonder" Paper Crane

- Guide caregivers and children through simple paper-folding (or accordion folding for younger kiddos) to make a hanging crane.
- Discuss: *What is a wish or a quiet thought you want to bring into your family fort?*

Step C: Mini Architectural Blueprint & Measurement

- On the blueprint card, children draw their dream fort design.
- Families practice measuring their mini craft-stick frame using non-standard units (e.g., *"My blueprint is 5 crayons wide and 3 blocks tall!"*).

As families create, encourage conversation by asking:

- *When you step inside a fort, how do you want to feel? Soft? Calm? Ready for adventure?*
- *Where in your home or yard is the quietest spot to notice nature or read a story?*

3. Family Activity: Light & Shadow Fort Assembly (8–10 Minutes)

Explain:

"Now let's bring our mini-fort elements together! A true fort comes alive when you turn on the light inside."

- Families use craft sticks, clothespins, and paper to erect a mini tabletop teepee or arch structure over their blueprint.
- Place the painted stone at the entrance as the "threshold stone."
- Perch or hang the origami paper crane inside the frame.
- Turn off the main overhead room lights! Have families turn on their mini flashlight inside their structure to project shadows and test the cozy glow.
- Conduct a brief 30-second **"Quiet Notice Moment"**: Everyone stays as still as a stone in their illuminated space and notices 1 quiet sound in the room.

Closing (2 Minutes)

Invite a few families to point out their favorite painted stone symbol or blueprint idea.

Close by saying:

"You don't need a giant castle to find magic—just a blanket, a quiet spot, a flashlight, and a heart ready to notice the world. Take your Sanctuary Kit home, pick a corner or a tree in your yard, lay down your stone, and build a space for wonder tonight!"

Take-Home Family Challenge

The Great Family Fort Build & /or/ Sound Hunt!

Take your Sanctuary Kit home!

1. **Build Your Space:** Use chairs, a bedsheet, clothespins, and your flashlight to build a family fort in the living room or under a tree outside.
2. **Set the Boundary:** Place your painted stone at the entrance to mark your special space!
3. **The /or/ Sound Hunt:** Sit inside your fort with your flashlight and read a book together. Every time someone hears or sees a word with the **/or/** sound (*Fort, Door, Floor, Storm, Morning, Shore, Outdoor*), everyone inside gives a quiet high-five!

Why This Works

This activity honors the poetic, reflective tone of *Forts* by shifting away from chaotic construction toward mindful, intentional creation. By combining fine motor skills (origami and rock painting) with STEM concepts (spatial design, balance, nonstandard measurement), children learn that environments can be shaped to influence how we feel. The inclusion of the phonological /or/ sound constraint bridges literacy directly into the physical experience, making learning natural, serene, and deeply memorable.

Materials to Prepare

Family Sanctuary Kit (One Per Family)

- Paper lunch bag
- 1 Mini LED tea light or mini flashlight
- 4–6 Large craft sticks
- 2 River rocks (washed clean and dried)
- 2 Square sheets of origami paper
- 2 Wood clothespins
- "Fort Architect Blueprint" mini printed cards

Station Setup

- Multi-color paint markers/acrylic pens
- Non-standard measuring tools (unifix cubes, yarn lengths)
- Painter's tape
- A few pre-folded paper cranes for display / easy step-by-step visual chart

(Paper Crane directions to print)

How to Fold an Origami Crane

1.Create the Diagonal Creases:Step 1.

Start with your paper color-side down. Fold diagonally in half both ways (corner to corner) to form an "X" crease pattern, then unfold flat.

2.Create the Straight Creases:Step 2.

Flip the paper over. Fold in half horizontally and vertically (edge to edge) to create a "+" crease pattern, then unfold flat.

3.Form the Square Base:Step 3.

Bring all four outer corners together into the bottom center point. Collapse the paper along your crease lines into a small, flat square diamond.

4.Fold Side Flaps to Center:Step 4.

With the open point facing down, fold the top-left and top-right edges into the center crease line (like a kite). Fold the top triangle flap down over them, crease firmly, then unfold all three flaps back to the square base.

5.The Petal Fold:Step 5.

Lift the top layer of the bottom open point upward like a bird's beak. Gently collapse the sides inward along the crease lines you made in Step 4 until it lays flat as a tall diamond. Flip over and repeat on the back side.

6.Narrow the Diamond:Step 6.

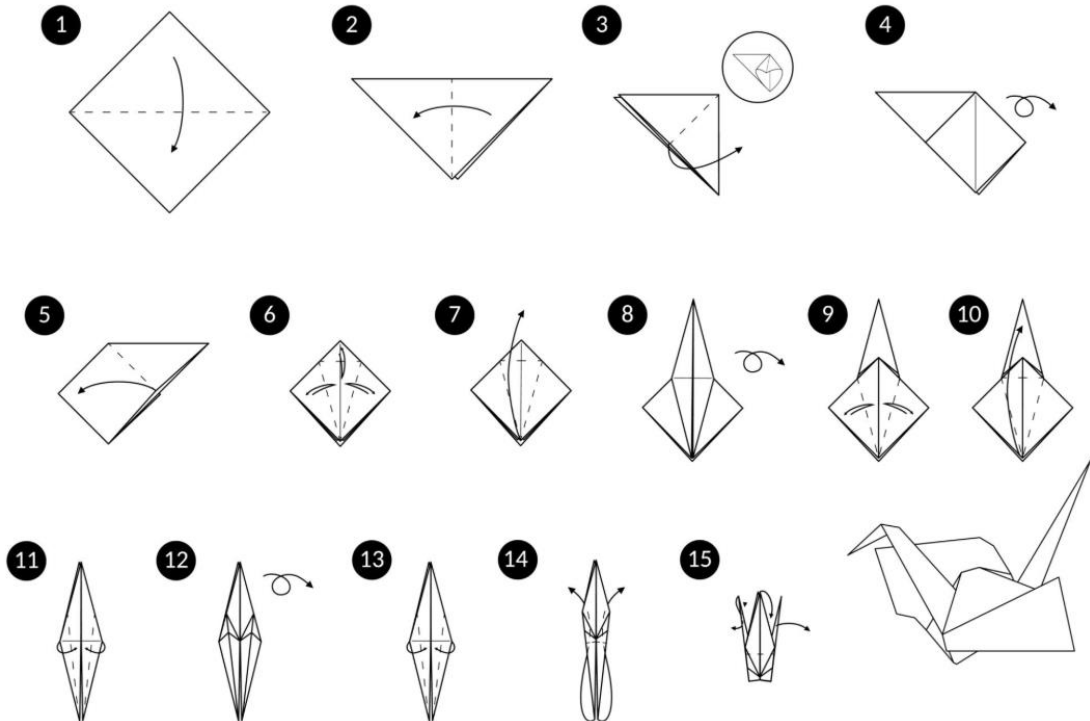
Fold the outer edges of the top layer inward to the center line again to narrow the legs at the bottom. Flip over and repeat on the back side.

7. Form the Neck and Tail: Step 7.

Use a reverse fold: lift one of the thin bottom legs upward and fold it inside the side flaps so it points out at an angle (this is your neck). Repeat with the other bottom leg for the tail.

8. Finish the Head and Wings: Step 8.

Fold the tip of the neck downward to create a small head. Finally, gently fold both wings downward away from the body.



Origami Crane Visual Step-by-Step Diagram. Source: bor-zebra / Getty Images

Pro Tip for Kids: If folding traditional cranes feels too tricky for 3 to 5-year-olds during your *Forts* Family Night, try an **accordion fold**! Simply fold a square paper back and forth like a fan, pinch it in the middle, and tie a string around it to make "flying bird wings"—it gives the same magical effect with zero frustration!